A Play-based Curriculum: Hong Kong Children's Perception of Play and Non-play

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Abstract: Hong Kong policy makers have been advocating 'learning through play' as the core element of the curriculum and pedagogy in the pre-primary education for many years. However, many pre-primary institutions are still inclined to stress the intellectual aspects rather than focusing on children's developmental needs, interests and abilities. In order to promote the use of a play-based pedagogy, it is essential to understand what 'play' is from the children's perspective. This qualitative study aims to explore how 'play' and 'non-play' are conceptualized amongst young children in the Hong Kong context. Two 5-6 year-old from pre-schools and two Primary one children with 6-7 year-old were invited to participate in the project. They were asked to: 1) take photographs of other children 'playing' and 'non-playing' in their preschool/schools and home/community settings; and, 2) draw pictures of 'play' and 'non-play'. Individual interviews were conducted to discuss about their drawings and the photographs they took and hence to understand how they made sense of 'play' and 'non-play'. The findings showed that both groups of children regarded 'play' as 'joyful' activities and 'non-play' as something related to work or task. The results also demonstrated the significant role of cultural context in influencing children's interests and hence their play.

Introduction

Play has long been recognized as an essential component of early childhood education. It plays a vital role in enhancing children's all-around development (NAEYC, 1995; OECD, 2002). Like many Western governments, the Hong Kong government advocates 'learning through play' as the central pedagogy for Hong Kong pre-primary education. In the latest issue of *The Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006), the government reiterated the key message that 'play is an indispensable and important tool for facilitating children's learning' (p. 51). However, the government's Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) Annual Reports have identified a discrepancy between official expectations and early childhood teachers' pedagogical practice, which is often teacher-directed (Education

Bureau, 2006/2007). Early childhood teachers find it hard to fully embrace play-based pedagogy without reservation (Cheng, 2001).

Studies have investigated the competence of early childhood teachers in adopting a more child-centered, play-based approach (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Opper, 1994), but there seem to be no studies in Hong Kong focusing on what play means to children, even though children are the main actors in play-based education. Vygotsky (1987) argued that the cultural-historical context around the individual has the power to shape social relations, community values, and past practices. In that respect, the cultural context significantly influences children's interests and, in turn, their play. Lillemyr (2009) claimed that play is actually a cultural phenomenon because it is deeply anchored in a child's culture. So, to understand play from Hong Kong children's perspective seems to be crucial in helping teachers implement a genuine play-based pedagogy. Therefore the aim of this study is to examine how children perceive play and non-play in both institutionalized and non-institutionalized settings. This sort of knowledge may help bridge the gap between the government's expectations about education and actual classroom practices.

What is Play?

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1995), play enables children to understand the world, interact with others socially, control and express emotions, and establish their symbolic representation capabilities. As a phenomenon, play has been examined from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives over many years (Broadhead, 2004; Spodek & Saracho, 1991; Wood & Attfield, 2005). However, it has proven to be difficult and controversial to define play in the early childhood education context; the term appears in different contexts in various forms rooted in different philosophical orientations.

Gadamer (1960) argued that players tend to have a feeling of "mere play," without always being consciously aware of their seriousness in the process. He stresses that "seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play" (p. 2). Hence, *play* seems to have two opposing connotations about how serious the player is. According to Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983), play is free from rules imposed from outside and requires an active engagement from the players themselves. The players are more concerned with activities than with goals. Vygotsky (1966), however, argued that "whenever there is an imaginary situation in play there are rules, not rules which are formulated in advance and which change during the course of the game, but rules stemming from the imaginary situation" (p. 10) because the rules dictate how play is enacted. Echoing this idea, Csikszentmihalyi (1993) identified six indicators that the player is in the state of playfulness: (1) having clear goals set by the player

himself, (2) concerned attention, (3) loss of self-consciousness, (4) an altered sense of time, (5) intrinsic motivation, and (6) the belief that an experience is worthwhile for its own sake.

In play, children seem to develop positive mindsets, such as active engagement, intense concentration, and goal-directed motivation, which are also essential attitudes for quality learning. In that respect, play has been advocated as a key strategy in many developed countries to help young children learn and develop. However, there is a tension between the ideology and the practice of play, especially when stakeholders are concerned about academic learning outcomes (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002; OFSTED, 1993; Sylva, Roy, & Painter, 1980; Wood & Bennett, 2000). In a society where academic achievement is highly valued, such as Hong Kong, teachers and parents hesitate to think of play as essential to child development; they are more likely to see it as an obstacle to children's academic success and future career prosperity.

Context of the Study

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the context is essential for making sense of any event, person, or thing. The context of the current study includes both in-class and out-of-class situations. Implementing play in Hong Kong is difficult because Hong Kong parents pay more attention to their children's achievement-oriented activities and schoolwork than to their social and cultural development (Pong & Chow, 2002). Some argue that the curriculum in Hong Kong has been designed around an unreasonably high standard in academic knowledge; thus, parents and teacher put great pressure on children to complete homework, often at the expense of children's social development (Salili, 1996).

Hayhoe (2008) has argued that in the Chinese education system teachers are expected to be skilled performers; they strive to perfect the presentation of each lesson. Teaching and learning seem to be inevitably teacher-centered. A well-known Chinese proverb describes education as follows: õrearing without nurturing is the fault of the father; teaching without discipline is the fault of the teacher.ö It is not easy for teachers and parents to take a non-directive role and let children play because, as guardians, they are likely to think of themselves as negligent (Cheng, 2001). When faced with the tension between ideal teaching and reality, teachers seem to be allied with parents in focusing on the academic goals over other goals. Kindergarten teachers react to the criticism that they do not use free-play activities in the curriculum by arguing:

parents prefer more writing and drills to playí they will object when they think

teachers spend too much time on playing but not teaching (Fung & Cheng, 2009, p. 5).

Though some teachers would like to try play-based learning, they find it difficult to fight against the cultural constraints. The result is that the Hong Kong preschool curriculum is highly structured, with very little room for innovative teaching (Cheng, 2008; Fung, 2007; Wong, 2005). Teachers tend to be satisfied with their teaching when they are directly instilling content in their students, and they feel frustrated when their teaching does not appear to directly teach children content (Cheng & Stimpson, 2004). In a classroom observation study, Li (2003) noticed that õ[t]eachers appeared to concentrate on their own needs for task completion, rather than on childrenøs needö (p. 40). In short, the play that does occur in Hong Kong schools ends up being teacher-centered play because play is used in the classroom as a tool for knowledge transmission, leaving children with very few opportunities to choose what they like to play.

Methods

Play in Hong Kong classrooms is persistently teacher-directed, but teachers seem to be unaware of the fact that they are actually preventing autonomous, self-directed play. Thus, they perpetuate a teacher-directed mode of õlearning through play.ö One way to address this problem is to learn more about childrenøs views of play. This kind of knowledge is particularly essential because it will help illustrate the discrepancies between what teachers think self-directed play looks like and what children actually see it.

If Vygotsky (1987) and Lillemyr (2009) are right and the environment around children affects how they perceive play, it is important to take various school experience into consideration when exploring childrenøs perception of play. In Hong Kong, the primary school curriculum is very different from kindergarten. Primary schools devote even less time to play. Therefore, this study includes children from both kindergarten and primary school. In addition, this study looks at play at both school and home to give a more holistic sociocultural picture. This qualitative study explores two specific questions:

1) What activities do children in Hong Kong perceive as play and non-play?
2) Are there any similarities or differences in how kindergarten children and primary school students perceive play and non-play?

Participants

This study followed two girls aged 5-6 years old in the upper class (K3) of kindergarten, Lily and Judy. It also followed one boy and one girl aged 6-7 in the first year (P1) of primary school, Peter and Kelly. They were nominated by their teachers based on their linguistic ability to articulate their thoughts.

Data Collection

Since children at this age have limited verbal and memory ability, they usually are not very capable of elucidating their thoughts, especially with strange adults. This makes it difficult to solicit complicated and abstract explanations of their views about play. Weber and Mitchell (1996) suggested that photographs have the potential to help people uncover layers of meanings. Therefore, this study used photography as a way to collect data. This might help young children make judgments about the things or events in the photographs that they regard as play and non-play. Moreover, it allows room for the informants to feel more comfortableô especially for shy childrenô because they are talking about other childrenøs play activities, meaning they do not have to be the focus of conversation.

The second source of data is childrenøs drawings of play and non-play. Children often lack the words to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and drawing can help them express these things (Dienske, 1985). Drawings are used here to help them conceptualize their perception of play.

The third source of data is semi-structured interviews. The interviews help the researchers figure out how the children make sense of the topic and probe further to clarify their thoughts.

Procedures

The four children were asked to take photographs of other children õplayingö and õnon-playingö in their kindergarten or primary school (institutionalized settings) and home or community (non-institutionalized settings). To control for potential confusion and sequence effects, the children were asked to take one type of picture each week during four consecutive weeks; the sequences of the picture types were counterbalanced across children.

After taking the photographs, each child was interviewed individually two times. Each interview lasted about 45 minutes to an hour, focusing on either play or non-play both in school and non-school settings, depending on what the child had photographed previously. Children were asked to sort their own photographs into four categories (Play/Institutionalized setting; Non-Play/Institutionalized setting;

Play/Non-institutionalized setting; Non-Play/Non-Institutionalized setting) and draw pictures of play and non-play. They were then asked to explain the reasons behind how they categorized their drawings and photographs. The whole interview process was recorded. The semi-structured interview questions included, for example: Can you tell me something about this photograph/drawing? Who is in it? Where are they? What are they doing? How do they feel? Responses were sometimes followed up with further questions for clarification and exploration. The audiotapes of the interviews were compiled and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The focus of analysis is on the children's perception of play and non-play. The research data was first analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. To categorize play and non-play, responses were categorized along seven key dimensions: behavior, characteristics, feeling, location, when, with whom, and object. The next step was to dig further into the data and re-examine its õknots in the webö (Van Manen, 1984, p. 59). All the transcriptions, photographs, and drawings were revisited carefully to get a sense of the whole picture. During the process of manual coding, the seven initial categories were revised, and some new themes emerged. Frequent discussions were conducted for data interpretation during the research process to avoid bias (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Findings

The findings of this study are organized according to the two guiding research questions listed above. The following sections present themes generated from the data. The responses appear in *italics* from the interviewers (I) and the four research participants: Lily (L) and Judy (J) from kindergarten and Peter (P) and Kelly (K) from primary school.

Children's Perception of Play

Self-initiative, Freedom of Choice, and Creation

In a photograph taken by Lily, a little boy was pushing a plastic object similar to a Big Wheel in the park outside his kindergarten during free time. Another photograph showed several children playing with the same thing in the same place at the same time. She regarded their activities as play because the children took the initiative to play. They could select what to play on their own and there was space for creation.

> I: *Why do you think that the child was playing?*
> L: *Because it looked like a wheel, while he was pushing it, it was like a flying*

aeroplane... you can create a game to play, and then you can play with your friends together....
I: ....what kind of games do you think the children were playing?
L: ...they were like delivering some goods....

I: Did you think of the game by yourselves?
L: Yes...you can move the wheel here and there like this, and someone can climb up on it and then jump down from it, it's fun....
I: Did the teacher suggest to you how to play?
L: No, she let us play freely...we can play together like this and be happier...it's not necessary for us to follow the teacher's suggestion. We play what we want to play.

In another example, Judy shared with us how she initiated a game by herself at home.

J: That was a plate of rice...I created a human face. It was fun when I was making it.
I: Could you tell me how you made it?
J: ...first of all, I put some rice in a bowl, then pressed it and put it upside down, then put some food on it.
I: Why do you think you were playing?
J: It was fun because I liked to play with the bean curd that made the eyes.

The Symbolic Representation in Play

In the minds of Lily and Judy, the presence of objects might stimulate them to create more new games by using them symbolically. In addition, these self-initiative and imaginative activities were õ*fun.*ö

I:...if the child did not use that wheel, do you think it is still fun?
L: There is no fun...because they need to have something.
I: Do you mean that you need to have something, and then you can create a lot of games from it?
L: Yes...there will be no fun if you get nothing to play with....

In a photograph, Lilyøs mother was õ*pretending to be a cow*ö and crawling on the floor at home. Lily clearly thought this was play, but this contradicted her earlier thought that objects are essential elements in pretend or imaginative play.

L: I was playing with mum...here was a farm which looked like a zoo...and I was

the visitor.

I: …you have just said that you need to have something to play with, but your mum didn't have anything in hand. She only used her hand to act like that…pressing her nose….

L: Because our hands are a kind of tool…we can also make use of them to play "paper, stone, scissors"….

Lily also described how she and her two friends õ*pretended to put on makeup by using a colored pencil as an eye-shadow pencil*ö when they felt bored at church. They also imagined it õ*as a syringe and pretended to do an injection.*ö An umbrella in her hand could become ski poles that enabled her to õ*play like skiing.*ö The CD boxes stored at home were like õ*bricks*ö that could be used for õ*constructing many houses,*ö and it was a game that could be õ*played alone or with my mother.*ö

Judy had a similar perception of symbolic representation in her pretend play. For example, one of her photographs showed her pretending to be õ*a postman*ö delivering a letter-like object taken from a paper box to her father at home. In another situation, she acted like a driver parking her big toy car in õ*a parking lot*ö outside her bedroom. She took a photograph of mahjong and described her game as follows:

J: This is mahjong. I think it was fun.
I: Really? How do you play it?
J: I can use it to make a maze…for the ants to walk through.

With the presence of objects, both Lily and Judy could create different forms of play at any time.

Connection with Positive Psychological Attributes

All the children associated play with positive feelings. For example, when they were asked why they categorized the activities as play, they had the following responses:

L: I thought that they were having much fun—they felt very happy…because they laughed…they couldn't stop playing it because it was fun.

J: This is a catapult.
I: …You were playing with it?
J: I enjoyed playing with it.

P: The baby girl was playing.

I: What was she playing?

P: Hitting the table with her hands…she was very happy.

I: How do you feel when you are rope-skipping?

K: Very happy.

Availability of Social Interaction

Lily thought play was a social activity that brought out happiness, as well as ideas for more play.

I: So, which one do you feel happier? Playing alone or with more people together?

L: With more people…both adults and children…because both of them can make suggestions, there will be more games to play and there will be different ways of play.

Connection between Physical Motion and Games

The two primary students**,** Peter and Kelly, tended to associate play with physical motion, for example, sports. To Peter, play includes *"playing badminton at school…chasing each other during recess time* [in the school playground]í *playing on a slide in a park*í *rope skipping…hula hoop…ice hockey…playing arcade basketball games at Jumpin Gym USA.*ö His explanation for why these activities are play is as follows:

I: Well, what's the difference between play and non-play?

P: There's big physical motion when they're playing. The motion will be less if play is not involved…. It's not play when you are walking slowly on the street. But it was play when you are playing on a slide in the park.

Similarly, Kelly said play included õ*football playing…bowling… rope skipping"* She claimed that basketball and rope skipping are õ*a kind of sports—I think that sports is play"*

Apart from these, Kelly and Peter also considered rule-based and arcade games to be play. For example, Kelly said that õ*chess is for people to play.*ö She also said that õ*the mechanical car"* and õ*pinball*ö at Jumpin Gym USA are õ*games because they have a start button.*ö Both Peter and Kelly described the traditional game of õ*rock, paper, scissors*ö as a game to play.

Children's Perception of Non-play

Learning Activities

All the children saw writing, reading, homework, and drawing as non-play. They tended to conceptualize these as learning activities. For example, Lily attended a drawing class as an extracurricular activity. She liked drawing but said õ*it was not play*ö because õ*it was only drawing pictures, not playing with pictures, and there was no toy to play with.*ö In a photograph taken at home, there was a whiteboard she had written some Chinese characters on. She also insisted that it was not play, even though she liked writing.

> L: Because it was only writing.
> I: Do you like writing?
> L: I like it.
> I: You like writing. Every time you write, you are not in play.
> L: Right.

Similarly, Kelly took photographs of her classmates writing in the classroom during recess time and said:

> K: They are writing…doing homework is not a motion of play.
> I: So what's the difference between rope skipping and doing homework?
> K: Rope skipping is a sports activity, but he is doing homework, not doing exercise….

She also thought that *"reading is not play*í *because reading can help you learn more words"* and *"classmates having lessons in class was learning."* To Judy, students could not play during the lesson because *"the teacher will ask you some questions sometimes, and you need to raise your hand and answer."*

Connection with Attitude Attributes

Lily, Judy, and Kelly tended to associate non-play with states like concentration, attention, and seriousness. Lily visited her friend and took a photograph of her playing piano. She described it as follows:

> L: She's not playing.
> I: Why don't you think so?
> L: Because she needed to be very concentrative while playing the piano….

She also said that she did not play while having lessons, as she *"must listen attentively"* Peter shared the same view:

> *I: When can you play in the classroom?*
> *P: Recess time.*
> *I: At recess. How about when you are having the lesson?*
> *P: You need to listen to what teacher says during the lesson.*

Judy thought that *"you need to be serious in lining up…and writing,"* so they were not play. *"You feel you are a little bit more serious when you are not playing."* As mentioned, Kelly considered reading to be non-play since it required *"attention."*

Connection with Negative Psychological States

Lily and Peter thought of non-play as an activity that can make you feel unhappy and bored. For example, Lily further elaborated that playing piano not only required concentration, but also aroused unpleasant feelings.

> *I: So do you think that she was happy while she was playing the piano?*
> *L: Feeling unhappy.*
> *I: Why? How do you know that?*
> *L: Because she…she was always scolded by her teacher. It's not because she*
> *was not attentive; she just played some tunes wrongly…her teacher required her*
> *to play the exact tune….*

To Lily, the serious demand of the piano teacher made piano playing become an unhappy activity. For Peter, when he was not at play, he felt õ*a bit bored.*ö

The Nature/Function of Events, Objects, and Places

All of the children conceptualized non-play according to the nature or function of events, objects, and places. They included: (1) daily routines, such as cooking, washing dishes, working, eating, shopping, talking on the phone, driving a car, throwing away rubbish, and sleeping; (2) objects, such as statues, cooking utensils, trees, rubbish bins, fire hose reels, escalators, food, air-conditioners, menus, and directories; and (3) places, such as police stations, shops, and banks. For example, the following are Judy and Peterøs explanations of their perceptions:

> *I: What do you do during free time at kindergarten?*
> *J: Play toy train.*
> *I: Are you at play when you are playing with the toy train?*
> *J: Yes.*

I: Why?
J: Because it is a toy.

I: Why they are not play?
J: Because it is a shop for selling goods and making money…not a game for play.The air-conditioner can make us feel cooler…the menu shows you the types of food you can order.
P: There was a lady cutting the grass in the garden…she was not playing…the grass was too long; she needed to cut it.

Similarities between Kindergarten Children & Primary Students

Positive Feelings

Children from both kindergarten and primary school tended to connect play with the feeling of enjoyment. One of the kindergarten children (Lily) and one of the primary students (Peter) associated non-play with feelings of unhappiness and boredom.

Nature of the Activities, Events, Objects, or Places

All of them thought that learning activities like writing were not a form of play, although both of the kindergarten children (Lily and Judy) said they liked writing. One child from each grade (Judy and Kelly) said that some activities were not play when the teacher was present.

I: Has your teacher ever played with you?
J: em….sometimes….when we go out to the park outside our kindergarten.
I: How did she play with you?
J: She was there….no, no, no, she did not play with us, and she only taught us how to play.

In a church event, Kelly took photographs of her friends and teacher singing in a birthday party at a primary school on a Sunday.

I: What were the people doing?
K: Singing.
I: Do you think that they were at play when singing?
K: Playing.
I: …any teacher there?
K: Yes.
I: Yes, so what was the teacher doing?

K: Taught us how to sing with the others together.
I: Who was she? (Pointing to a lady in another photograph)
K: The teacher.
I: ...So the teacher was playing with the children.
K: No.
I: What was she doing then if she was not playing at that time?
K: Singing…singing.
I: But you just told me that when the people were singing, it meant that they were playing. Was the teacher playing when she was teaching you to sing?
K: No.

In addition, both kindergarten children (Lily and Judy) and one of the primary students (Kelly) thought non-play activities require deep concentration and seriousness. The activities they referred toô such as piano playing, reading, writing, or having lessons in classô contained some elements of learning.

Finally, all the participants tended to differentiate play and non-play by looking at the nature of the events, objects, and places involved. In one example, Judy took a photograph of a can of potato chips and stated that it was not play. However, it could become a game for play if the chips were eaten and the can was empty.

J: You can't play with it because it is food.
I: We can't play with food?
J: Yes, because it needs to be clean for eating.
I: How about if I play with that can, like throwing or hitting it here and there?
J: Yes, you can, only if the chips are finished…otherwise they will be thrown out, and then you have nothing to eat.
I: What about if I finish all the chips, and I throw the can here and there, do you think that I am playing?
J: Yes, you can play like that.

To Kelly, the elder primary one child, it was not play when her housemaid was cooking because õ*she was preparing food for me to eat.*" But when cooking becomes a false act, it is play. She conceptualized play and non-play through her understanding of the nature of the event.

I: How about if children cook? Are they at play?
K: Yes, they are playing… because it's not real…not real.

Contrasting Views between Kindergarten Children & Primary Students

The Matter of Rules

Both kindergarten children (Lily and Judy) often associated play with the symbolic use of toys or objects in pretend play, as illustrated in the last section. Lily preferred games with fewer rules:

> *L: em…some games have rules, and some games haven't.*
> *I: Do you prefer a game with rules to follow or without rules?*
> *L: er…it's better to have no rules.*
> *I: Why?*
> *L: Because I can create freely, not necessary to follow the rules to play.*

In contrast, the two primary one children (Peter and Kelly) tended to perceive play as formal games related to physical activities, like sports or other rule-based games.

Timing for Play

Both kindergarten children played during non-organized times, such as free time at school. Judy mentioned her situation in the following response:

> *I: Can you play at your kindergarten?*
> *J: You can play when you go to school…before the class begins…after school.*

Although Peter mentioned that they could play during recess, another primary child (Kelly) and many of her classmates tended to use their recess time to do homework.

> *I: Do children play at your school?*
> *K: No. They don't play because of examinations.*
> *I: What about the non-examination period? Do they play?*
> *K: No…nobody plays.*

Willingness to Express Preference for Play

In this study, both kindergarten children frankly expressed that they liked to play, but primary children were reluctant to say so. When the interviewers promised to keep the conversation private from their teacher and parents, a primary boy (Peter) pointed to a drawing of play with an embarrassed smile, indicating he would rather go play instead of study. He explained: õ*because play can…make you feel happier.*ö When asked why

they would not go play, a primary girl (Kelly) responded that she only liked to study.

> K: Because…I am too busy to play.
> I: Because you are too busy to play. So if you could choose between playing and not playing, what would you choose?
> K: …not playing…because…I can…learn more words.
> I: What kind of thing do you want to do then?
> K: Reading, reading.
> I: Why?
> K: Because I don't like to play…because…I am studying…I don't want to play in the park.
> I: …er…Why?
> K: Because…my grades are dropping.

Discussion

This study elicited children's perspectives on play and non-play. In accordance with the play literature, both kindergarten and primary children see play as self-initiated, intrinsically motivated, enjoyable, and creative, often involving social interaction. Kindergarten children were more likely to see play as symbolic pretense, whereas primary school children often associated play with sports and rule-based games. But both kindergarten and primary school children saw non-play— often learning and working activities— as serious, concentrative, unhappy, and boring. Kindergarten children specifically described classroom activities with the presence of a teacher as non-play; only self-initiated activities during recess were play. Primary school children did not even play during recess. They often worked on their homework during recess. As much as they liked to play, primary children (but not kindergarten children) were reluctant to say that they would prefer play to study when given a choice.

The Issue of Learning through Play in the Early Childhood Classroom

Children distinguished play from learning on the dimension of positive versus negative psychological states. Play is fun; learning is not. Children in both grades claimed that class time was not the time for play. Kindergarten children especially claimed that, with the presence of teachers, classroom activities were non-play, even though kindergarten teachers often plan their curricula through "play" (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Results from the present study clearly indicated that children did not appreciate the idea of learning through play. Research has shown that younger preschool children fail to recognize the teacher's real intention embedded in games

(Frye & Wang, 2008; Ziv & Frye, 2004), which, the researchers argue, might hinder children's learning. Does that mean that, by recognizing the teacher's real intention, the kindergarten children in the current study were more cognitively mature and in a better position to learn? Or did they simply not buy the teacher's "coax", instead drawing a clear line between free play and teacher-directed activities? In either case, the results underscore the difficulties of implementing teaching and learning through play in kindergartens.

The Issue of School Transition

Why were the primary school children reluctant to say that they liked to play? The study was conducted in March and April of their first school year, which means these primary school children had only been in formal schooling for about six months. In a lot of the non-play photos, the primary students were doing homework during recess, which should have been their playtime. Compared to now, the primary school students said they had played more in kindergarten. If the kindergarten children's responses suggested a failure of attempts to teach through play, the answers of the primary students paint an even gloomier picture. The ruthless reality of educational pressure explains why parents and teachers alike insist on academic readiness during preschool years, despite their desire for their children to play more.

Implications for Play-based Curriculum

What can preschool educators learn from children's perceptions of play? Play implies positive attitudes, such as active engagement, intense concentration, and goal-directed motivation. The goal of play-based curricula is to transfer these essential attitudes to quality learning. However, the reality is that teacher-directed pseudoplay cannot achieve that goal. As reviewed before, Hong Kong kindergarten children spend most of their school days following teachers' instructions; there is little room for children's own free playful expression (Cheng, Fung, Lau, & Benson, 2008). However, for play-based curricula to work, teachers need to listen to what children have to say and rethink their curriculum and pedagogy. Only when the play is authentically child-initiated and self-motivated can children actively engage in and benefit from it. Instead of imposing their agendas on children, teachers need to follow children's lead and be keen enough observers to identify teachable moments.

Hong Kong is sandwiched between a culture that highly values academic excellence and a prosperous global economy where competition in the job market is notoriously fierce. It is a widespread belief that a good education means a prestigious job, which in turn brings better quality of life (Liu & Kuan, 1988). With this mix of cultural beliefs, social policies, and educational practices, young learners in Hong Kong still

face great challenges in taking charge of their own learning.

This study reveals that implementing play in Hong Kong is really a complex issue of which very little empirical data can be drawn to inform practice. Given that the four informants came from a middle class background, there is a limitation regarding the information derived from the cultural dimension. The result of this study also suggests that further research could be continued to investigate on how childrenøs demographical background and school experiences affect their conceptualization of play.

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